

Apprenticeships Get Comprehensive

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By Sarah Etter, News Reporter

"For years, the Department of Labor wanted to get involved with an apprenticeship program with the DOC. Whether an inmate is carrying certification that says he has mastered a skill set or an employer can hire a heavy equipment operator from us, we want to take advantage of that for our offenders."

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Commissioner

Indiana officials hope this month's opening of the Plainfield Re-entry and Educational Facility will bolster their commitment to lowering recidivism rates by giving offenders returning to their communities even more skills so they can succeed after prison.

The Indiana Department of Correction is adding another dimension to its programming with apprenticeship programs that prepare offenders for the job world.

"For years, the Department of Labor wanted to get involved with an apprenticeship program with the DOC," says IDOC Commissioner J. David Donahue. "Whether an inmate is carrying certification that says he has mastered a skill set or an employer can hire a heavy equipment operator from us, we want to take advantage of that for our offenders."

The INDOC teamed up with a number of state organizations to prepare inmates for the work force. However, the apprenticeship programs throughout its facilities are not just about training inmates for specialized labor.

"You might be able to become a carpenter, a mechanic or a lawn care specialist," says Olgen Williams, an INDOC re-entry specialist consultant. "But you still must have employment skills. You have to show up on time. You have to make sure you are assertive and not aggressive. You have to be trustworthy and honest. You must be a good employee from the inside out."

Now, the INDOC has established several apprenticeship programs across the state. At the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility, inmates learn to assemble driver manuals. They are responsible for 600 hours of classroom instruction and 8,000 hours of training in order to qualify for certification. They also can take part in carpentry apprenticeships.

According to Donahue, programs like these are key to helping inmates become desired employees at corporations across the state.

"Our bottom line is to make employers want to hire these inmates. If we can prove to an employer that it will improve their bottom line to hire five inmates instead of one after release, it improves state revenue and gives these offenders a chance at a real life. We have to prove the value of hiring the offender population," Williams explains.

Another aspect of Indiana's apprenticeship mindset is employer buy-in. Rather than waiting to consult companies after an offender is released, the INDOC is attempting to bring employers to each facility in order to solidify the best training techniques.

"If a company wants to hire an offender with the set skills of ABC and we're training the offender the skills of XYZ, it's not effective," Williams says. "We need the suggestions of local employers so that we can effectively train these inmates in apprenticeship programs. That's a newer aspect we're developing right now. We want this program to fit their needs as well."

Accountability partners help in this area. They support offenders, but will not do all the work for them. Their relationship is based on the idea that an offender needs a resource to turn to. According to Williams, adding new aspects to apprenticeship programs can add new dimension to inmates.

"We want this program to work inside and out," he says. "We don't want it to work during incarceration and just fail when an offender is released. We're working on this for a long term solution to the employment problem plaguing offenders that are released to the community."

Bottom Line: Comprehensive apprenticeship programs are just the helping hand offenders need to return to their communities, especially with local company buy-in for inmate labor.

About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.